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ABSTRACT

Literature can bring meaning to student research. When students read they develop connections to characters. They care; they empathize; they recognize the issues that face characters' lives, and they develop beliefs about those issues. Students' new feelings and beliefs motivate them to conduct research related to those issues and sustain them through research. In the same way that students have an emotional response to their personal experience, students also have an emotional response to literature. At the University of Tulsa this translates into meaningful research in the first-year writing course. Maxine Hong Kingston's "Woman Warrior" not only engages students imaginatively, but also introduces a range of issues from Chinese cultural practices such as foot binding to women's issues in this country that are suitable research topics. Further, once students are motivated to begin their research, the text provides an effective context for teaching analysis and argument, two skills necessary for writing a research paper. As the narrator of "Woman Warrior" is engaged in an analysis of her life, the book models a kind of thinking relevant to student researchers. Kingston's theses are elusive; to understand her text therefore students must analyze its components to understand its implicit unity. Faced with the components that they have gathered throughout their research--notecards, notes, and duplicated pages--students analyze the implicit connections among pieces of information. Finally, Kingston's text demonstrates arguments between competing views, i.e., Chinese and American identity. (TB)

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Taking It Personally:

Using Literature to Stimulate and Sustain Research

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At the University of Tulsa, research is one of three primary components of our first year, second semester Writing II. The objective of Writing II is to teach analysis, argumentation and library research. The research component culminates in two shorter or one longer argumentative, researched and documented paper. In addition to a rhetoric and research handbook, our instructors use primary texts to raise issues which lead to class discussion and paper topics. The primary texts encourage meaningful critical thinking and act as springboards into research. I believe that literature engages writers in the most stimulating library research that they will conduct in a first year writing class.

Typically students do not embrace research eagerly. The task can be a lonely and arduous one. Students work on tasks that may sound interesting at the onset, but after hours in the library, after stacks of books, and yellow line after line on the computer screen, the research may disconnect from people and ideas that the student understands. Often, for the student, research is an educational ritual that has lost its meaning.

Literature can bring meaning to student research. When students read they develop connections to characters. They care; they empathize; they recognize the issues that face characters' lives,

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and they develop beliefs about those issues. Students' new feelings and beliefs motivate them to conduct research related to those issues and sustain them through the research. Students' personal investment in issues can be heightened and sustained through literature.

For a long time writing teachers have known that there is a quality about the personal experience essay that distinguishes it from other essays that first year students write. This distinguishing quality is feeling. There is emotion as well as thought behind the personal experience essay; the writer knows and feels his or her ideas. This combination of thought and feeling produces compelling prose. Because students have an emotional and an intellectual response to their experience, their prose is heightened; often they produce better writing.

In the same way that students have an emotional response to their personal experience, students also have an emotional response to literature. When characters are real, as Pirsig's and many of Kingston's characters are, or seem real, as Hurston's and Erdrich's fictional characters do, students have feelings about those characters and the issues that they face. Although their research is fueled by a "felt" interest in the lives of characters, students escape many of the typical weaknesses of personal narratives by writing about issues. Students escape the subjectivity of the personal essay by focusing on an issue rather than an experience and an issue that faces another person rather than themselves. Students avoid confessional prose by writing argumentative prose.

The text sustains interest in research by keeping the research real. Whereas research can be lonely, the primary text creates a community of researchers who share a concern and an interest in related issues. Whereas students in the middle of research might feel as though their research has become a fact hunt that is disconnected from their experience, with a primary text, research connects to the text. Students see the relevance of research because they see immediate application in the text. Furthermore the relevance of research is reinforced when it is shared within the community of researchers.

I am going to share with you the ways that students connect with one of these primary texts, The Woman Warrior: A Memoir of A Girlhood Among Ghosts by Maxine Hong Kingston. Additionally I'll discuss how the text facilitates analysis and argumentation, two skills that are necessary for conducting research.

One of the most fascinating characters in Kingston's text is Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior. She is, quite literally, a story book hero. At the age of seven, she leaves her home and family to train for fifteen years as a martial arts warrior so that she can take her father's place in war. When Fa Mu Lan defeats the baron and returns authority to the peasants, she sets free those who are held captive in the baron's house. The text provokes students to write about issues that arise from the following scene narrated by Fa Mu Lan:

> I searched the house . . . . I came upon a locked room. When I broke down the door, I found women, cowering, whimpering women. I heard shrill insect noises and scurrying. They

> blinked weakly at me like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat. The servants who walked the ladies had abandoned them, and they could not escape on their little bound feet. Some crawled away from me using their elbows to pull themselves along. These women could not be good for anything. I called the villagers to come identify any daughters they wanted to take home but no one wanted any.
>
> (Kingston 44)

Kingston illustrates women's subjectivity and students quickly identify relevant issues. Many students are interested in foot binding; one student wrote a paper on the ritualized mutilation of the female body; another wrote on the commodification of women, still another wrote about China's history of marriage laws and one student wrote about China's single child policy.

Once students are motivated to begin their research, the text provides an effective context for teaching analysis and argument, two skills necessary for writing a research paper. The Woman Warrior models analysis. The narrator of The Woman Warrior is engaged in an analysis of her own life. In her words, she is "establishing realities" (Kingston 5). Her written text is an analysis of her childhood. She probes the past in order to understand what Chinese is, who her ancestors are, who her mother is. Kingston analyzes her childhood to solve what Kingston describes as the common dilemma of all first generation immigrants: "how the invisible world that the immigrants built around [their children's] childhood fits into solid America" (Kingston 5). She must analyze her

childhood to understand herself. Kingston is engaged in the original I-Search.

Students can observe analytical and creative thinking that can aid them in their research. Kingston begins her analysis by breaking her subject down into its basic components. Kingston takes these components--childhood stories, ideas, and experiences--and uses them to structure the text, thematically, not chronologically. Kingston takes these components and turns them over like blocks, looking at each side. Kingston employs creative thinking. When she is prevented from seeing a side, she hypothesizes about what it is that she cannot view. Kingston's method can be confusing to students. But when students understand Kingston's thought process, they can apply her analytical and creative approach to research.

Kingston thinks creatively when she tries to understand why her aunt would commit adultery. Because she cannot ask her family, she creates possible reasons. To help students understand her thinking method, as a class, we list all of the explanations Kingston offers for her aunt's pregnancy. Then I ask students to add to the list. Students transfer these brainstorming techniques to their own research when I ask them to imagine, to create, the supporting ideas and documents that they would like to find when they conduct their research. Imagining resources helps students identify what they want to know.

By reading, discussing, and writing students develop analysis skills. Kingston's theses are elusive; to understand Kingston's text, students must analyze the components of her text. Students hone their skills when they reorder Kingston's components. In discussions

and in writing, students reveal the unity implicit in Kingston's chapters. Students take on a similar analytical task when they write their research papers. Faced with the components that they have gathered throughout their research--notecards, notes, and duplicated pages--students analyze the implicit connections between pieces of information.

As well as modeling analysis, The Woman Warrior facilitates the development of argumentation skills. Kingston's text is not unlike the readers that many of us use in our writing classes. Within the text are many genres: first person narratives, persuasive essays, and stories from other cultures. The narratives, essays and stories all have cultural, social, and historical relevance. The text addresses current issues such as gender roles, family relationships, segregation, assimilation, essentializing ethnicity, race relations, and social crisis. At its heart Woman Warrior is an issue-oriented text which facilitates argument.

Not only is the text issue oriented, but it is also argumentative since Kingston takes a stand on women's and race issues. Kingston's depictions encourage argument; there is opposition between groups. One student calls attention to polarizations when he names the following pairs: "men and women, China and America, tradition and new ideas, and young and old" (Dayan Cretan). But he apologizes for what he calls his "generalized term" and their oversimplification of the complex relationships between these pair. Indeed debates develop in the text between two sides:

- Brave Orchid who wants her daughter to be Chinese vs.

  her daughter who is struggling to attain an American identity

- Moon Orchid who is hold on to her passive Chinese femininity vs. Brave Orchid who has adopted an assertive feminine identity
- The No Name woman who asserts her independence vs. the village who fights for stability and group survival

There is even opposition within the same individual: Fa Mu Lan masquerades as a man in battle, even while she is pregnant, but returns to the traditional role of a Chinese woman after she retires as the leader of the revolution. As students read the text and come to class prepared to discuss the text, debates often arise as students align themselves with one side of the issue or the other. With instructor guidance students can develop argument skills in class.

Students apply argumentation skills practiced in class in writing assignments. Students can moderate in their written texts among Kingston and other writers as they address issues that develop in Woman Warrior. In addition to polishing argumentation skills, such an assignment prepares students to moderate the many voices that a research paper will incorporate.

I believe that a primary text engages writers in the most stimulating library research that they will conduct in a first year writing class. Not only is the text the impetus for research but it also is a valuable source of information, insider information that cannot always be gained through library research. One student writes that "Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior gives us a window into the life of a child of Chinese immigrants. We become privy to information that would undoubtedly have escaped even the most curious eyes" (Dayan Cretan). These private details enrich the research that results.

Those of us who research independently, without the prompting and guidance of a class syllabus, do so because we care. We care; we feel; we believe strongly about something and so we conduct research to substantiate our thoughts and our feelings. Most first year students do not share our motivations for conducting research. They often do not know what they care about enough to research it. A primary text gives students someone to care about. Students latch onto characters and begin to care about the issues that impact those character's lives. They are connected enough to care about issues and objective enough to reason through the issues. They are motivated to research.